Structural Realism

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Reader's Guide

This chapter examines a body of realist theories that argue that states care deeply about the balance of power and compete among themselves either to gain power at the expense of others or at least to make sure they do not lose power. They do so because the structure of the international system leaves them little choice if they want to survive. This competition for power makes for a dangerous world where states sometimes fight each other. There are, however, important differences among structural realists. In particular, defensive realists argue that structural factors limit how much power states can gain, which works to ameliorate security competition. Offensive realists, on the other hand, maintain that the system's structure encourages states to maximize their share of world power, to include pursuing hegemony, which tends to intensify security competition. The subsequent analysis revolves around four questions. Why do states want power? How much power do they want? What causes war? Can China rise peacefully (the thematic of the case study)?

Introduction

Realists believe that power is the currency of international politics. Great powers, the main actors in the realists' account, pay careful attention to how much economic and military power they have relative to each other. It is important not only to have a substantial amount of power, but also to make sure that no other state sharply shifts the balance of power in its favour. For realists, international politics is synonymous with power politics.

There are, however, substantial differences among realists. The most basic divide is reflected in the answer to the simple but important question: why do states want power? For classical realists like Hans Morgenthau (1948a), the answer is human nature. Virtually everyone is born with a will to power hardwired into them, which effectively means that great powers are led by individuals who are bent on having their state dominate its rivals. Nothing can be done to alter that drive to be all-powerful. A more detailed treatment of classical realism can be found in **Chapter 3**.

For structural realists, sometimes called neorealists, human nature has little to do with why states want power. Instead, it is the structure or architecture of the international system that forces states to pursue power. In a system where there is no higher authority that sits above the great powers, and where there is no guarantee that one will not attack another, it makes eminently good sense for each state to be powerful enough to protect itself in the event it is attacked. In essence, great powers are trapped in an iron cage where they have little choice but to compete with each other for power if they hope to survive.

Structural realist theories ignore cultural differences among states as well as differences in regime type, mainly because the international system creates the same basic incentives for all great powers. Whether a state is democratic or autocratic matters relatively little for how it acts towards other states. Nor does it matter much who is in charge of conducting a state's foreign policy. Structural realists treat states as if they were black boxes: they are assumed to be alike, save for the fact that some states are more or less powerful than others.

There is a significant divide between structural realists, which is reflected in the answer to a second question that concerns realists: how much power is enough? **Defensive realists** like Kenneth Waltz (1979), whose book is discussed as a featured text, maintain that it is unwise for states to try to maximize their share of world power, because the system will punish them if they attempt to gain too much power. The pursuit of hegemony, they argue, is especially foolhardy. **Offensive realists** like John Mearsheimer (2001) take the opposite view; they maintain that it makes good strategic sense for states to gain as much power as possible and, if the circumstances are right, to pursue hegemony. The argument is not that conquest or domination is good in itself, but instead that having overwhelming power is the best way to ensure one's own survival. For classical realists, power is an end in itself; for structural realists, power is a means to an end and the ultimate end is survival.

Power is based on the material capabilities that a state controls. The balance of power is mainly a function of the tangible military assets that states possess, such as armoured divisions and nuclear weapons. However, states have a second kind of power, latent power, which refers to the socio-economic ingredients that go into building military power. Latent power is based on a state's wealth and the size of its overall population. Great powers need money, technology, and personnel to build military forces and to fight wars, and a state's latent power refers to the raw potential it can draw on when competing with rival states. It should be clear from this discussion that war is not the only way that states can gain power. They can also do so by increasing the size of their population and their share of global wealth, as China has done over the past few decades.

Let us now consider in greater detail the structural realists' explanation for why states pursue power, and then explore why defensive and offensive realists differ about how much power states want. The focus will then shift to examining different structural realist explanations about the causes of great power war. Finally, I will illuminate these theoretical issues with a case study that assesses whether China can rise peacefully.

Why do states want power?

There is a simple structural realist explanation for why states compete among themselves for power. It is based on five straightforward assumptions about the international system. None of these assumptions alone says that states should attempt to gain power at each other's

expense. But when they are married together, they depict a world of ceaseless security competition.

The first assumption is that great powers are the main actors in world politics and they operate in an anarchic system. This is not to say that the system is characterized by chaos or disorder. Anarchy is an ordering principle; it simply means that there is no centralized authority or ultimate arbiter that stands above states. The opposite of anarchy is hierarchy, which is the ordering principle of domestic politics.

The second assumption is that all states possess some offensive military capability. Each state, in other words, has the power to inflict some harm on its neighbour. Of course, that capability varies among states and for any state it can change over time.

The third assumption is that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. States ultimately want to know whether other states are determined to use force to alter the balance of power (**revisionist states**), or whether they are satisfied enough with it that they have no interest in using force to change it (**status quo states**). The problem, however, is that it is almost impossible to discern another state's intentions with a high degree of certainty. Unlike military capabilities, intentions cannot be empirically verified. Intentions are in the minds of decision-makers and they are especially difficult to discern.

One might respond that policy-makers disclose their intentions in speeches and policy documents, which can be assessed. The problem with that argument is policy-makers sometimes lie about or conceal their true intentions. But even if one could determine another state's intentions today, there is no way to determine its future intentions. It is impossible to know who will be running foreign policy in any state five or ten years from now, much less whether they will have aggressive intentions. This is not to say that states can be certain that their neighbours have or will have revisionist goals. Instead, the argument is that policy-makers can never be certain whether they are dealing with a revisionist or status quo state.

The fourth assumption is that the main goal of states is survival. States seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order. They can pursue other goals like prosperity and protecting human rights, but those aims must always take a back seat to survival, because if a state does not survive, it cannot pursue those other goals.

The fifth assumption is that states are rational actors, which is to say they are capable of coming up with sound strategies that maximize their prospects for survival. This is not to deny that they miscalculate from time to time. Because states operate with imperfect information in a complicated world, they sometimes make serious mistakes.

Again, none of these assumptions by themselves says that states will or should compete with each other for power. For sure, the third assumption leaves open the possibility that there is a revisionist state in the system. By itself, however, it says nothing about why all states pursue power. It is only when all the assumptions are combined together that circumstances arise where states not only become preoccupied with the balance of power, but acquire powerful incentives to gain power at each other's expense.

To begin with, great powers fear each other. There is little trust among them. They worry about the intentions of other states, in large part because they are so hard to divine. Their greatest fear is that another state might have the capability as well as the motive to attack them. This danger is compounded by the fact that states operate in an anarchic system, which means that there is no nightwatchman who can rescue them if they are threatened by another country. When a state dials the emergency services for help, there is nobody in the international system to answer the call.

The level of fear between states varies from case to case, but it can never be reduced to an inconsequential level. The stakes are simply too great to allow that to happen. International politics is a potentially deadly business where there is the ever-present possibility of war, which often means mass killing on and off the battlefield, and which might even lead to a state's destruction.

Great powers also understand that they operate in a self-help world. They have to rely on themselves to ensure their survival, because other states are potential threats and because there is no higher authority they can turn to if they are attacked. This is not to deny that states can form alliances, which are often useful for dealing with dangerous adversaries. In the final analysis, however, states have no choice but to put their own interests ahead of the interests of other states as well as the so-called international community.

Fearful of other states, and knowing that they operate in a self-help world, states quickly realize that the best way to survive is to be especially powerful. The reasoning here is straightforward: the more powerful a state is relative to its competitors, the less likely it is that it will be attacked. No country in the western hemisphere, for example, would dare strike the USA, because it is so powerful relative to its neighbours.

This simple logic drives great powers to look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favour. At the very least, states want to make sure that no other state gains power at their expense. Of course, each state in the system understands this logic, which leads to an unremitting competition for power. In essence, the structure of the system forces every great power—even those that would otherwise be satisfied with the status quo—to think and act when appropriate like a revisionist state.

One might think that peace must be possible if all of the major powers are content with the status quo. The problem, however, is that it is impossible for states to be sure about each other's intentions, especially future intentions. A neighbour might look and sound like a status quo power, but in reality is a revisionist state. Or it might be a status quo state today, but change its stripes tomorrow. In an anarchic system, where there is no ultimate arbiter, states that want to survive have little choice but to assume the worst about the intentions of other states and to compete for power with them. This is the tragedy of great power politics.

The structural imperatives described above are reflected in the famous concept of the **security dilemma** (Herz 1950; see also Glaser 1997). The essence of that dilemma is that most steps a great power takes to enhance its own security decrease the security of other states. For example, any country that improves its position in the global balance of power does so at the expense of other states, which lose relative power. In this zero-sum world, it is difficult for a state to improve its prospects for survival without threatening the survival of other states. Of course, the threatened states then do whatever is necessary to ensure their survival, which, in turn, threatens other states, all of which leads to perpetual security competition.

How much power is enough?

There is disagreement among structural realists about how much power states should aim to control. Offensive realists argue that states should always be looking for opportunities to gain more power and should do so whenever it seems feasible. States should maximize power, and their ultimate goal should be hegemony, because that is the best way to guarantee survival.

While defensive realists recognize that the international system creates strong incentives to gain additional increments of power, they maintain that it is strategically foolish to pursue hegemony. That would amount to overexpansion of the worst kind. States, by their account, should not maximize power, but should instead strive for what Kenneth Waltz calls an 'appropriate amount of power' (1979: 40). This restraint is largely the result of three factors.

Defensive realists emphasize that if any state becomes too powerful, **balancing** will occur. Specifically, the other great powers will build up their militaries and form a balancing coalition that will leave the aspiring hegemon at least less secure, and maybe even destroy it. This is what happened to Napoleonic France (1792–1815), Imperial Germany (1900–18), and Nazi Germany (1933–45) when they made an attempt to dominate Europe. Each aspiring hegemon was decisively defeated by an alliance that included all, or almost all, of the other great powers. Otto von Bismarck's genius, according to the defensive realists, was that he understood that too much power was bad for Germany, because it would cause its neighbours to balance against it. So, he wisely put the brakes on German expansion after winning stunning victories in the Austro–Prussian (1866) and Franco–Prussian (1870–1) Wars.

Some defensive realists argue that there is an **offence–defence balance**, which indicates how easy or difficult it is to conquer territory or defeat a defender in battle. In other words, it tells you whether or not offence pays. Defensive realists maintain that the offence–defence balance is usually heavily weighted in the defender's favour, and thus any state that attempts to gain large amounts of additional power is likely to end up fighting a series of losing wars. Accordingly, states will recognize the futility of offence and concentrate instead on maintaining their position in the balance of power. If they do go on the offensive, their aims will be limited.

Defensive realists further argue that, even when conquest is feasible, it does not pay: the costs outweigh the benefits. Because of nationalism, it is especially difficult, sometimes impossible, for the conqueror to subdue the conquered. The ideology of nationalism, which is pervasive and potent, is all about self-determination, which virtually guarantees that occupied populations will rise up against the occupier. Moreover, it is difficult for foreigners to exploit modern industrial economies, mainly because information technologies require openness and freedom, which are rarely found in occupations.

In sum, not only is conquest difficult but, even in those rare instances where great powers conquer another state, they get few benefits and lots of trouble. According to defensive realism, these basic facts about life in the international system should be apparent to all states and should limit their appetite for more power. Otherwise, they run the risk of threatening their own survival. If all states recognize this logic—and they should if they are rational actors—security competition should not be particularly intense, and there should be few great power wars and certainly no **central wars** (conflicts involving all or almost all the great powers).

Offensive realists do not buy these arguments. They understand that threatened states usually balance against dangerous foes, but they maintain that balancing is often inefficient, especially when it comes to forming balancing coalitions, and that this inefficiency provides opportunities for a clever aggressor to take advantage of its adversaries. Furthermore, threatened states sometimes opt for **buck-passing** rather than joining a balancing coalition. In other words, they attempt to get other states to assume the burden of checking a powerful opponent while they remain on the sidelines. This kind of behaviour, which is commonplace among great powers, also creates opportunities for aggression.

Featured book

Kenneth Waltz (1979), *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley).

Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) is structural realism's foundational text, and probably the most influential book written in international relations over the past fifty years. Its core thesis is that the absence of a higher authority that states can turn to in a crisis, coupled with their interest in survival, leaves states little choice but to compete with each other for power. It makes sense to have more power than your rivals if you have to depend on yourself when trouble comes knocking. After all, stronger states are less likely to be attacked than weaker states.

Waltz maintains, however, that states should not attempt to maximize their power, because efforts to acquire more power can easily backfire. They should definitely not seek hegemony. Indeed, their main goal should be to ensure that other states do not gain power at their expense. 'The first concern of states', he emphasizes, 'is not to maximize power, but to maintain their positions in the system'. Furthermore, Waltz does not suggest that going to war to gain power makes good strategic sense. In essence, there are real limits on the severity of security competition in Waltz's world, which is why he is sometimes labelled a 'defensive' realist.

States should temper their appetite for power, Waltz argues, because of the prevalence of balancing behaviour. States almost always check rival states that seek to become especially powerful. Threatened states can build up their own capabilities—'internal balancing'—or join together and form a balancing coalition—'external balancing'. Because 'balances of power recurrently form,' says Waltz, aggressive states should expect to be stopped by their potential victims.

Theory of International Politics contains several other important ideas. Waltz argues that bipolar systems are more peaceful than multipolar systems and that economic interdependence makes conflict more likely. He also introduces the important distinction between balancing and **bandwagoning**, the latter referring to states joining forces with a rising state that is winning wars and gaining power. He maintains that, 'Balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system', because states do not want to be vulnerable to a powerful partner. Finally, Waltz makes the controversial argument that cooperation among states is difficult because of concerns about 'relative gains'. Making deals is difficult, he suggests, because states worry that the other side will gain a bigger share of the pie and shift the balance of power in its favour.

Offensive realists also take issue with the claim that the defender has a significant advantage over the attacker, and thus offence hardly ever pays. Indeed, the historical record shows that the side that initiates war wins more often than not. And while it may be difficult to gain hegemony, the USA did accomplish this feat in the western hemisphere during the nineteenth century. Also, Imperial Germany came close to achieving hegemony in Europe during the First World War.

Both defensive and offensive realists agree, however, that nuclear weapons have little utility for offensive purposes, except where only one side in a conflict has them. The reason is simple: if both sides have a survivable retaliatory capability, neither gains an advantage from striking first. Moreover, both camps agree that conventional war between nuclear-armed states is possible but not likely, because of the danger of escalation to the nuclear level.

Finally, while offensive realists acknowledge that sometimes conquest does not pay, they also point out that sometimes it does. Conquerors can exploit a vanquished state's economy for gain, even in the information age. Indeed, Peter Liberman argues that information technologies have an 'Orwellian' dimension, which facilitates repression in important ways (1996:

126). While nationalism surely has the potential to make occupation a nasty undertaking, occupied states are sometimes relatively easy to govern, as was the case in France under the Nazis (1940–4). Moreover, a victorious state need not occupy a defeated state to gain an advantage over it. The victor might annex a slice of the defeated state's territory, break it into two or more smaller states, or simply disarm it and prevent it from rearming.

For all of these reasons, offensive realists expect great powers to be constantly looking for opportunities to gain advantage over each other, with the ultimate prize being hegemony. The security competition in this world will tend to be intense and there are likely to be great power wars. Moreover, the grave danger of central war will arise whenever there is a potential hegemon on the scene.

The past behaviour of the great powers has been more in accordance with the predictions of offensive rather than defensive realism. During the first half of the twentieth century, there were two world wars in which three great powers attempted and failed to gain regional hegemony: Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany. The second half of that century was dominated by the Cold War, in which the USA and the Soviet Union engaged in an intense security competition that came close to blows in the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962).

Many defensive realists acknowledge that the great powers often behave in ways that contradict their theory. They maintain, however, that those states were not behaving rationally, and thus it is not surprising that Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany were destroyed in those wars they foolishly started. States that maximize power, they argue, do not enhance their prospects for survival; they undermine it.

This is certainly a legitimate line of argument but, once defensive realists acknowledge that states often act in strategically foolish ways, they need to explain when states act according to the dictates of their structural realist theory and when they do not. Thus, Waltz famously argues that his theory of international politics needs to be supplemented by a separate theory of foreign policy that can explain misguided state behaviour. However, that additional theory, which invariably emphasizes domestic political considerations, is not a structural realist theory.

The theories of defensive realists such as Barry Posen, Jack Snyder, and Stephen Van Evera conform closely to this simple Waltzian template. Each argues that structural logic can explain a reasonable amount of state behaviour, but a substantial amount of it cannot be explained by structural realism. Therefore, an alternative theory is needed to explain those instances where great powers act in non-strategic ways. To that end, Posen (1984) relies on organizational theory, Snyder (1991) on domestic regime type, and Van Evera (1999) on militarism. Each is proposing a theory of foreign policy, to use Waltz's language. In essence, defensive realists have to go beyond structural realism to explain how states act in the international system. They must combine domestic-level and system-level theories to explain how the world works.

Offensive realists, on the other hand, tend to rely exclusively on structural arguments to explain international politics. They do not need a distinct theory of foreign policy, mainly because the world looks a lot like the offensive realists say it should. This means, however, that they must make the case that it made strategic sense for Germany to pursue hegemony in Europe between 1900 and 1945, and for Japan to do the same in Asia between 1931 and 1945. Of course, offensive realists recognize that states occasionally act in strategically foolish ways, and that those cases contradict their theory. Defensive realists, as emphasized, have

a fall-back position that is not available to offensive realists: they can explain cases of non-strategic behaviour with a separate theory of foreign policy.

What causes great power war?

Structural realists recognize that states can go to war for any number of reasons, which makes it impossible to come up with a simple theory that points to a single factor as the main cause of war. There is no question that states sometimes start wars to gain power over a rival state and enhance their security. But security is not always the principal driving force behind a state's decision for war. Ideology or economic considerations are sometimes paramount. For example, nationalism was the main reason Bismarck launched wars against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870–1). The Prussian leader wanted to create a unified Germany.

Wars motivated largely by non-security considerations are consistent with structural realism as long as the aggressor does not purposely act in ways that would harm its position in the balance of power. Actually, victory in war almost always improves a state's relative power position, regardless of the reason for initiating the conflict. The German state that emerged after 1870 was much more powerful than the Prussian state Bismarck took control of in 1862.

Although isolating a particular cause of all wars is not a fruitful enterprise, structural realists maintain that the likelihood of war is affected by the architecture of the international system. Some realists argue that the key variable is the number of great powers or poles in the system, while others focus on the distribution of power among the major states. A third approach looks at how changes in the distribution of power affect the likelihood of war. Finally, some realists claim that variations in the offence–defence balance have the greatest influence on the prospects for war.

The polarity of the system

A longstanding debate among realists is whether **bipolarity** (two great powers) is more or less war-prone than **multipolarity** (three or more great powers). It is generally agreed that the state system was multipolar from its inception in 1648 until the Second World War ended in 1945. It was only bipolar during the Cold War, which began right after the Second World War and ran until 1989.

It is tempting to argue that it is clear from twentieth-century European history that bipolarity is more peaceful than multipolarity. After all, there were two world wars in the first half of that century, when Europe was multipolar, while there was no shooting war between the USA and the Soviet Union during the latter half of that century, when the system was bipolar.

This line of argument looks much less persuasive, however, when the timeline includes the nineteenth century. There was no war between any European great powers from 1815 to 1853, and again from 1871 to 1914. Those lengthy periods of relative stability, which occurred in multipolar Europe, compare favourably with the 'long peace' of the Cold War. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether bipolarity or multipolarity is more prone to great power war by looking at modern European history.

Proponents of these rival perspectives, however, do not rely on history alone to make their case; they also employ theoretical arguments. Realists who think bipolarity is less war-prone offer three supporting arguments. First, they maintain that there is more opportunity for great powers to fight each other in multipolarity. There are only two great powers in bipolarity, which means there is only one great power versus great power dyad. In multipolarity, by contrast, there are three potential conflict dyads when there are three great powers, and even more as the number of great powers increases.

Second, there tends to be greater equality between the great powers in bipolarity because, the more great powers there are in the system, the more likely it is that wealth and population, the principal building blocks of military power, will be distributed unevenly among the great powers. And, when there are power imbalances, the stronger often have opportunities to take advantage of the weaker. Furthermore, it is possible in a multipolar system for two or more great powers to gang up on a third great power. Such behaviour is impossible, by definition, in bipolarity.

Third, there is greater potential for miscalculation in multipolarity, and miscalculation often contributes to the outbreak of war. Specifically, there is more clarity about potential threats in bipolarity, because there is only one other great power. Those two states invariably focus on each other, reducing the likelihood that they will misgauge each other's capabilities or intentions. In contrast, there are a handful of great powers in multipolarity and they usually operate in a fluid environment, where identifying friends from foes as well as their relative strength is more difficult.

Balancing is also said to be more efficient in bipolar systems, because each great power has no choice but to directly confront the other. After all, there are no other great powers that can do the balancing or can be part of a balancing coalition and although lesser powers can be useful allies they cannot decide the overall balance of power. In multipolarity, however, threatened states will often be tempted to pass the buck to other threatened states. Although buck-passing is an attractive strategy, it can lead to circumstances where aggressors think they can isolate and defeat an adversary. Of course, threatened states can choose not to pass the buck and instead form a balancing coalition again the threatening state. But putting together alliances is often an uncertain process. An aggressor might conclude that it can gain its objectives before the opposing coalition is fully formed. These dynamics are absent from the simple world of bipolarity, where the two rivals have only each other to think about.

Not all realists, however, accept the claim that bipolarity facilitates peace. Some argue that multipolarity is less war-prone. In this view, the more great powers there are in the system, the better the prospects for peace. This optimism is based on two considerations. First, **deterrence** is much easier in multipolarity, because there are more states that can join together to confront an especially aggressive state with overwhelming force. In bipolarity, there are no other balancing partners. Balancing in multipolarity might be inefficient sometimes, but eventually the coalition forms and the aggressor is defeated, as Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany all learned the hard way.

Second, there is much less hostility among the great powers in multipolarity, because the amount of attention they pay to each other is less than in bipolarity. In a world with only two great powers, each concentrates its attention on the other. But, in multipolarity, states cannot afford to be overly concerned with any one of their neighbours. They have to spread around

their attention to all the great powers. Plus, the many interactions among the various states in a multipolar system create numerous cross-cutting cleavages that mitigate conflict. Complexity, in short, dampens the prospects for great power war.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union many realists argue that **unipolarity** has arrived (Wohlforth 1999). The USA, in other words, is the sole great power. It has achieved global hegemony, a feat no other country has ever accomplished. Other realists, however, argue that the post-Cold War system is multipolar, not unipolar. The USA, they maintain, is by far the most powerful state on earth, but there are other great powers, such as China and Russia.

What are the consequences for international stability if the international system is unipolar? Such a world is likely to be more peaceful than either a bipolar or multipolar world. Most importantly, there can be neither security competition nor war between great powers in unipolarity, because it includes just one great power. Furthermore, the minor powers are likely to go out of their way to avoid fighting the sole pole. Think about the western hemisphere, where the USA clearly enjoys hegemony. No state in that region would willingly start a war with the USA for fear of being easily and decisively defeated. This same logic would apply to all regions of the world if the USA was a global hegemon.

There are two caveats to this line of argument. If the hegemon feels secure in the absence of other great powers and pulls most of its military forces back to its own region, security competition and maybe even war is likely to break out in the regions it abandons. After all, the sole pole will no longer be present in those places to maintain order. On the other hand, the hegemon might think that its superior position creates a window of opportunity for it to use its awesome military power to reorder the politics of distant regions. A global hegemon engaged in large-scale social engineering at the end of a rifle barrel will not facilitate world peace. Still, there cannot be war between great powers in unipolarity.

Balanced or imbalanced power

Rather than look to the number of great powers to explain the outbreak of war, some realists argue that the key explanatory variable is how much power each of them controls. Power can be distributed more or less evenly among the great powers. Although the power ratios among all the great powers affect the prospects for peace, the key ratio is that between the two most powerful countries in the system. If there is a lopsided gap, the number one state is a preponderant power, simply because it is so much more powerful than all the others.[1] However, if the gap between numbers one and two is small, there is said to be a rough balance of power, even though power might not be distributed equally among all the great powers. The key point is that there is no marked difference in power between the two leading states.

Some realists maintain that the presence of an especially powerful state facilitates peace. A preponderant power, so the argument goes, is likely to feel secure because it is so powerful relative to its competitors; therefore, it will have little need to use force to improve its position in the balance of power. Moreover, none of the other great powers is likely to pick a fight with the leading power, because they would almost certainly lose. However, war among the lesser great powers is still possible, because the balance of power between any two of them will at least sometimes be roughly equal, thus allowing for the possibility that one might

defeat the other. But, even then, if the preponderant power believes that such wars might upset a favourable international order, it should have the wherewithal to stop them, or at least make them unusual events.

The historical case that proponents of this perspective emphasize is the period between Napoleon's defeat in 1815 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. There were only five wars between the great powers during these hundred years (1853–6, 1859, 1866, 1870–1, 1904–5), and none was a central war like the two conflicts that bracket the period. This lengthy period of relative peace—sometimes called the *Pax Britannica*—is said to be the consequence of Britain's commanding position in the international system. Conversely, the reason there were central wars before and after this period is that Napoleonic France and Imperial Germany, respectively, were roughly equal in power to Britain.

Other realists take the opposite view and argue that preponderance increases the chance of war. Indeed, central wars are likely when there is an especially powerful country in the system. A preponderant power, according to this perspective, is a potential hegemon. It has the wherewithal to make a run at dominating the system, which is the best guarantee of survival in international anarchy. Therefore, it will not be satisfied with the status quo, but instead will look for opportunities to gain hegemony. When there is rough equality among the great powers, no state can make a serious run at hegemony, ruling out deadly central wars. Great power wars are still possible, but the fact that power tends to be rather evenly distributed reduces the incentives for picking fights with other great powers.

Proponents of this viewpoint argue that the Napoleonic Wars were largely due to the fact that France was a potential hegemon by the late eighteenth century. The two world wars happened because Germany was twice in a position during the first half of the twentieth century to make a run at European hegemony. The long period of relative peace from 1815 to 1914 was not due to the *Pax Britannica*, because Britain was not a preponderant power. After all, no balancing coalition ever formed against Britain, which was hardly feared by Europe's continental powers. The reason there were lengthy periods of peace in Europe during these hundred years is that there was a rough balance of power in multipolar Europe. Unbalanced multipolarity, not balanced multipolarity, increases the risks of great power war.

Power shifts and war

Other realists maintain that focusing on static indicators like the number of great powers or how much power each controls is wrongheaded. They claim that instead the focus should be on the dynamics of the balance of power, especially on significant changes that take place in the distribution of power (Copeland 2000). Probably the best known argument in this school of thought is that a preponderant power confronted with a rising challenger creates an especially dangerous situation, because a central war usually results. The dominant state, knowing its days at the pinnacle of power are numbered, has strong incentives to launch a preventive war against the challenger to halt its rise. Of course, the declining state has to act while it still enjoys a decided power advantage over its growing rival. Some scholars argue that the rising power is likely to initiate the war in this scenario. But that makes little sense, because time is on the side of the ascending power, which does not need a war to catch up with and overtake the leading state.

The origins of the two world wars are said to illustrate this line of argument. Germany was the dominant power in Europe before both conflicts, but each time it faced a rising challenger to its east: Russia before 1914 and the Soviet Union before 1939. To forestall decline and maintain its commanding position in the European balance of power, Germany launched preventive wars in 1914 and 1939, both of which turned into devastating central wars.

The offence–defence balance

As noted, some defensive realists argue that there is an offence–defence balance which almost always favours the defence, and thus works to dampen security competition. As such, that balance is a force for peace. Some defensive realists, however, allow for significant variation in the balance between defence and offence, and argue that offensive advantage is likely to result in war, while defence dominance facilitates peace. For example, the Second World War occurred because the tank and the dive bomber, when incorporated into a blitzkrieg doctrine, markedly shifted the offence–defence balance in the offence's favour. On the other hand, there was no shooting war between the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, because the coming of nuclear weapons sharply shifted the balance in the defence's favour.

In sum, a variety of structural arguments attempt to explain when great power war is more or less likely. Each has a different underlying causal logic and each looks at the historical record in a different way.

Case study: can China rise peacefully?

The Chinese economy has been growing at an impressive pace since the early 1980s, and many experts expect it to continue expanding at a similar rate over the next few decades. If so, China, with its huge population, will eventually have the wherewithal to build an especially formidable military. China is almost certain to become a military powerhouse, but what China will do with its military muscle, and how the USA and China's Asian neighbours will react to its rise, remain open questions.

There is no single structural realist answer to these questions. Some realist theories predict that China's ascent will lead to serious instability, while others provide reasons to think that a powerful China can have relatively peaceful relations with its neighbours as well as the USA. Let us consider some of these different perspectives, starting with offensive realism, which predicts that a rising China and the USA will engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war.

The rise of China according to offensive realism

The ultimate goal of the great powers, according to offensive realism, is to gain hegemony, because that is the best guarantor of survival. In practice, it is almost impossible for any country to achieve global hegemony, because it is too hard to project and sustain power around the planet and onto the territory of distant great powers. The best outcome that a state can hope for is to be a regional hegemon, which means dominating one's own geographical area. The USA's 'Founding Fathers' and their successors understood this basic logic and they worked assiduously to make the USA the dominant power in the western hemisphere. It finally achieved regional hegemony in 1898. While the USA has grown even more powerful since then, and is today the most powerful state in the system, it is not a global hegemon.

States that gain regional hegemony have a further aim: they seek to prevent great powers in other geographical regions from duplicating their feat. Regional hegemons do not want peer competitors.

Instead, they want to keep other regions divided among several major states, who will then compete with each other and not be in a position to focus on them. Thus, after achieving regional dominance, the USA has gone to great lengths to prevent other great powers from controlling Asia and Europe. There were four great powers in the twentieth century that had the capability to make a run at regional hegemony: Imperial Germany (1900–18), Imperial Japan (1931–45), Nazi Germany (1933–45), and the Soviet Union (1945–89). In each case, the USA played a key role in defeating and dismantling those aspiring hegemons. In short, the ideal situation for any great power is to be the only regional hegemon in the world.

If offensive realism is correct, we should expect a rising China to imitate the USA and attempt to become a regional hegemon in Asia. China will seek to maximize the power gap between itself and its neighbours, especially Japan and Russia. China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it. An increasingly powerful China is also likely to try to push US military forces out of Asia, in much the same way as the USA pushed the European great powers out of the western hemisphere in the nineteenth century. China can be expected to come up with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine.

From China's perspective, these policy goals make good strategic sense. Beijing should want a militarily weak Japan and Russia as its neighbours, just as the USA prefers a militarily weak Canada and Mexico on its borders. All Chinese remember what happened in the last century when Japan was powerful and China was weak. Furthermore, why would a powerful China accept US military forces operating in its backyard? US policy-makers, after all, become incensed when other great powers send their military forces into the western hemisphere. They are invariably seen as a potential threat to US security. The same logic should apply to China.

It is clear from the historical record how US policy-makers will react if China attempts to dominate Asia. The USA does not tolerate peer competitors, as it demonstrated in the twentieth century; it is determined to remain the only regional hegemon. Therefore, the USA will work hard to contain China and ultimately to weaken it to the point where it is no longer a threat to control the commanding heights in Asia. In essence, the USA is likely to behave towards China in much the same way as it behaved towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

China's neighbours are also sure to fear its rise, and they too will do whatever they can to prevent it from achieving regional hegemony. In fact, there is already evidence that countries like India, Japan, and Russia, as well as smaller powers like Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam, are worried about China's ascendancy and are looking for ways to contain it. In the end, they will join a US-led balancing coalition to check China's rise, in much the same way as Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and even China, joined forces with the USA to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The rise of China according to defensive realism

In contrast to offensive realism, defensive realism offers a more optimistic story about China's rise. For sure, defensive realists recognize that the international system creates strong incentives for states to want additional increments of power to ensure their survival. A mighty China will be no exception; it will look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in its favour. Moreover, both the USA and China's neighbours will have to balance against China to keep it in check. Security competition will not disappear altogether from Asia as China grows more powerful. Defensive realists are not starry-eyed idealists.

Nevertheless, defensive realism provides reason to think that the security competition surrounding China's rise will not be intense, and that China should be able to coexist peacefully with both its neighbours and the USA. For starters, it does not make strategic sense for great powers to pursue hegemony, because their rivals will form a balancing coalition and thwart—maybe even crush—them. It is much smarter for China's leaders to act like Bismarck, who never tried to dominate Europe, but still made Germany great, rather than like Kaiser Wilhelm or Adolf Hitler, who both made a run at hegemony and led Germany to ruin. This is not to deny that China will attempt to gain power in Asia. But structure dictates that it will have limited aims; it will not be so foolish as to try to maximize its share of world power. A powerful China with a limited appetite should be reasonably easy to contain and to engage in cooperative endeavours.

(*continued*)

The presence of nuclear weapons is another cause for optimism. It is difficult for any great power to expand when confronted by other powers with nuclear weapons. India, Russia, and the USA all have nuclear arsenals, and Japan could quickly go nuclear if it felt threatened by China. These countries, which are likely to form the core of an anti-China balancing coalition, will not be easy for China to push around as long as they have nuclear weapons. In fact, China is likely to act cautiously towards them for fear of triggering a conflict that might escalate to the nuclear level. In short, nuclear weapons will be a force for peace if China continues its rise.

Finally, it is hard to see what China gains by conquering other Asian countries. China's economy has been growing at an impressive pace without foreign adventures, proving that conquest is unnecessary for accumulating great wealth. Moreover, if China starts conquering and occupying countries, it is likely to run into fierce resistance from the populations which fall under its control. The US experience in Iraq should be a warning to China that the benefits of expansion in the age of nationalism are outweighed by the costs.

Although these considerations indicate that China's rise should be relatively peaceful, defensive realists allow for the possibility that domestic political considerations might cause Beijing to act in strategically foolish ways. After all, they recognize that Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany made ill-advised runs at hegemony. But they maintain that the behaviour of those great powers was motivated by domestic political pathologies, not sound strategic logic. While that may be true, it leaves open the possibility that China might follow a similar path, in which case its rise will not be peaceful.

There are other structural realist perspectives for assessing whether or not China's rise will be peaceful. If the world is unipolar, as some structural realists argue, then the growth of Chinese power will eventually put an end to unipolarity. When it does, the world will be a more dangerous place, since there cannot be war between great powers in unipolarity, while there certainly can be if both China and the USA are great powers. Furthermore, if Japan acquires nuclear weapons, Russia gets its house in order, and India continues its rise, there would be a handful of great powers in the system, which would further increase the potential for great power conflict.

Of course, one might argue that China's ascendancy will lead to bipolarity, which is a relatively peaceful architecture, even if it is not as pacific as unipolarity. After all, there was no shooting war between the superpowers during the Cold War. Indeed, the security competition between them was not especially intense after the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was more dangerous before then, mainly because the USA and the Soviet Union had to come to grips with the nuclear revolution and also learn the rules of the road for dealing with each other under bipolarity, which was then a new and unfamiliar structure. China and the USA, however, would have the benefit of all that learning that took place during the Cold War, and could deal with each other from the start much the way that Moscow and Washington dealt with each other after 1962.

Not all structural realists accept the argument that bipolarity is more prone to peace than multipolarity. For them, a return to bipolarity would be a cause for pessimism. However, if the rise of China were accompanied by the emergence of other great powers, the ensuing multipolarity would give these realists more cause for optimism.

Finally, for structural realists who believe that preponderance produces peace, the rise of China is ominous news. They argue that US power has had a pacifying effect on international politics. No other great power, and certainly no minor power, would dare pick a fight with the USA as long as it sits at the pinnacle of world power. But that situation would obviously change if China reached the point where it was almost as powerful as the USA. Preponderance would disappear, and without it the world would be a much more dangerous place. Indeed, these realists would argue that the USA would have strong incentives to launch a preventive war against China to forestall decline.

In sum, there is no consensus among structural realists about whether China can rise peacefully. This diversity of views is not surprising since these same realists disagree among themselves about how much power states should want as well as what causes war. The only important point of agreement among them is that the structure of the international system forces great powers to compete among themselves for power.

Conclusion

It was commonplace during the 1990s for pundits and scholars to proclaim that the world was rapidly becoming more peaceful and that realism was dead. International politics was said to have been transformed with the end of the Cold War. Globalization of the economic sort was supposedly tying the state in knots; some even predicted its imminent demise. Others argued that Western elites were for the first time thinking and talking about international politics in more cooperative and hopeful terms, and that the globalization of knowledge was facilitating the spread of that new approach.

Many argued that democracy was spreading across the globe and, because democracies do not fight each other, we had reached 'the end of history' (classical liberalism is discussed in **Chapter 5**). Still others claimed that international institutions were finally developing the capacity to cause the major powers to act according to the rule of law, not the dictates of realism.

In the wake of September 11, that optimism has faded, if not disappeared altogether, and realism has made a stunning comeback. Its resurrection is due in part to the fact that almost every realist opposed the Iraq War, which has turned into a strategic disaster for the USA and the UK. But, more importantly, there is little reason to think that globalization or international institutions have crippled the state. Indeed, the state appears to have a bright future, mainly because nationalism, which glorifies the state, remains a powerful political ideology. Even in Western Europe, where there has been unprecedented economic integration, the state is alive and well.

Furthermore, military power is still a critical element in world politics. The USA and the UK, the world's two great liberal democracies, have fought five wars together since the Cold War ended in 1989. Both Iran and North Korea remind us that nuclear proliferation remains a major problem, and it is not difficult to posit plausible scenarios where India and Pakistan end up in a shooting war that involves nuclear weapons. It is also possible, although not likely, that China and the USA could get dragged into a war over Taiwan, or even North Korea. Regarding China's rise, even the optimists acknowledge that there is potential for serious trouble if the politics surrounding that profound shift in global power are handled badly.

In essence, the world remains a dangerous place, although the level of threat varies from place to place and time to time. States still worry about their survival, which means that they have little choice but to pay attention to the balance of power. International politics is still synonymous with power politics, as it has been for all of recorded history. Therefore, it behoves students of IR to think long and hard about the concept of power, and to develop their own views on why states pursue power, how much power is enough, and when security competition is likely to lead to war. Thinking smartly about these matters is essential for developing clever strategies, which is the only way states can mitigate the dangers of international anarchy.

Questions

1. Why do states in international anarchy fear each other?
2. Is there a reliable way to determine the intentions of states?
3. Is China's rise likely to look like Germany's rise between 1900 and 1945?
4. Does it make sense for states to pursue hegemony?
5. Why was the Cold War not a hot war?

6. Does it make sense to assume that states are rational?
7. Is balancing a reliable deterrent against aggressive states?
8. What is the security dilemma and is there a solution to it?
9. Is the USA a global hegemon?
10. Is unipolarity more peaceful than bipolarity or multipolarity?
11. Is realism relevant in contemporary Europe?
12. What is the tragedy of great power politics?

Further reading

Brown, M. E., Coté Jr, O. R., Lynn-Jones, S. M., and Miller, S. E. (2004) (eds), *Offense, Defense, and War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
Contains key articles by structural realists, including Robert Jervis's seminal article, 'Cooperation under the Security Dilemma', *World Politics*, 1978.

Copeland, D. C. (2000), *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
Sophisticated brief for the claim that major wars are caused by sharp changes in the balance of power.

Dickinson, G. L. (1916), *The European Anarchy* (New York: Macmillan Company).
Short, but brilliant book which introduced the concept of international anarchy.

Dunne, T. and Schmidt, B. (2004), 'Realism', in J. Baylis and S. Smith (eds), *The Globalization of World Politics*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
An accessible chapter which charts the major debates within and about realism.

Glaser, C.L. (2010), *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
A thorough explication of defensive realism that treats it largely as a normative theory.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton).
The most comprehensive statement of offensive realism.

Posen, B. R. (1984), *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
A smart book that sets out the limits of structural realism for explaining military doctrine.

Schmidt, B. C. (1988), *The Political Discourse of Anarchy* (Albany: State University of New York Press).
A history of the early years of the discipline of International Relations which shows the dominance of realism.

Snyder, J. (1991), *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and the International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
Excellent case studies on how the great powers behaved in the twentieth century from a defensive realist perspective.

Van Evera, S. (1999), *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
An important study which argues that the offence–defence balance explains much of international history.

Walt, S. M. (1987), *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
Influential work on the prevalence of balancing behaviour in international politics.

Waltz, K. N. (1979), *Theory of International Politics* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley).
Seminal book that lays out the fundamentals of structural realism but with a defensive realist bent.

Important websites

Interviews with Robert Jervis, John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, and Kenneth Waltz
http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/alpha.html

Introduction to realism **www.geocities.com/virtualwarcollege/ir_realism.htm**

Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy attempts to push US foreign policy in a realist direction
www.realisticforeignpolicy.org/

Note

1. The presence of a preponderant power is not the same as unipolarity, because a preponderant power is not the only great power in the system. In unipolarity, there is a single great power.

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book for lots of interesting additional material. **www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/dunne3e/**